

LONDON 2012

VOICES FROM A CLASSROOM



Validating a wide range of cultural contexts in the Drama classroom

A Creative Partnership Enquiry project between Tamasha Theatre Company and a London Comprehensive School

By Kristine Landon-Smith & Zoe Merritt

How did the project come about?

The teacher's point of view

As a Head of Drama in a London Comprehensive it has always been my aim to recognise and work with the range of cultures that make up our school community. I suppose I had followed the traditional route of ensuring that multi-cultural themes, stories and play texts were included in the curriculum and that all students were enjoying and achieving well in my drama lessons. However, I was frustrated that the range of cultures and languages in the classroom was not always reflected in the students' writing or devising. In summer 2009 I was given the opportunity to develop our cultural practice further by being the school coordinator for an enquiry project with Creative Partnerships. The project was to take place over twelve months and was to focus on our school priority – celebrating the diversity of our school community.

As soon as I met with our Creative Agent for the project, Alda Terraciano, and discussed with her my project ideas and aims she said 'I think you need to work with Tamasha'. I had heard of Tamasha, but had no idea that we may be able to work with such a prestigious theatre company. Interviews were soon set up and I found myself interviewing (although I think she was really interviewing me!) Kristine Landon-Smith, Artistic Director of Tamasha Theatre Company. A few weeks later the project planning was complete and Kristine was booked to start as our artist in residence for six weeks from the beginning of January. The project would involve Kristine working with our two Year 10 GCSE Drama classes and using the lesson time and as well as after school masterclasses to train both students and teachers in her methods of drawing out improvised bilingual performances focusing on the students' cultural backgrounds.

The director's point of view

I was intrigued when Alda Terraciano asked me if I wanted to work with a London Comprehensive School on this project. I had previously set up my own project with a range of schools nationally in 2000 where Tamasha helped teachers capture and use students' cultural contexts in the creation of work.

This project was called Tamasha Intracultural Millennium Education. The success of the project depended very much on the culture of the school and the individual teacher's willingness and ability to really 'play' and 'work' with the cultures in the classroom. Often this was a much more up front exchange between pupil and teacher than most teachers had been used to. Some teachers found the very direct approach to 'playing' with culture too intrusive and pulled away from asking very direct questions as a starting point like 'Where are your grandparent's from?'; 'What language do they speak?'; 'Can you perform your grandmother in her language?' Other teachers embraced the open dialogue around cultural context and grew their practice in parallel with their growing confidence around tackling conversations and improvisations about race and culture head on.

So I was excited that a team of teachers at Zoe Merritt's school had identified for themselves that perhaps the cultures of the classroom were not always wholly reflected in the work and I was excited that the school were so keen to make a complex exploration into this area. I spoke a lot in my interview with Zoe about how language was a key factor in this and that all the languages that were present in the classroom would be used. Zoe was very intrigued and excited by the idea that every language would have the same currency.

The Process

The teacher's point of view

We started the process with a masterclass for the teachers who would be delivering the project. Kristine brought in five actors she has worked with and her aim was to demonstrate her methods of drawing bilingual and cultural work from the actors. Myself and two colleagues from the drama department were participating and trying out Kristine's methods while a number of other teachers from the school were observing. The masterclass began with games, the purpose being to engage us as directors with the actors we would be working with throughout the masterclass. Kristine was stopping and guiding us on how to use the games to develop relationships with the group. We then moved onto learning about the way in which Kristine begins to draw performances from her actors. As a drama teacher used to establishing a separate audience and acting space it was fascinating to see how Kristine 'smudged the edges' of performance and started the improvisation almost as if it was a conversation; 'So you are upsetting your mother by not finding a job, huh?' She would stop and start the improvisation encouraging her actors to speak in their first language (Gujarati in this instance) or to adopt an accent relevant to their cultural background. In drama teaching language, she was using a mixture of hot seating, spontaneous improvisation and director/teacher- in- role to draw out character, text and performance. Gradually my colleagues and I were encouraged to try out this method and with Kristine's expert guidance were able to use the way she works to encourage and draw out performances.

The project then moved to Year 10 Drama lessons. Kristine instantly

engaged the students with her high energy rehearsal games and exercises. They were not used to beginning a lesson in this way so the excitement from them was apparent. Students' comments about Kristine in their journals were very positive, for example

She was very confident, energetic; it made the rest of the class feel like they can just stand up and play their characters with passion. It improved their confidence a lot.

From a teaching point of view I was hugely impressed with the rapport Kristine achieved with the students almost immediately. In the first session the class were divided with half throwing themselves into the work and half holding back and observing, but as the sessions progressed gradually all the students were involved in creating characters

Creative Partnership Timeline

October 2009

Initial meeting with Creative Agent

November 2009

Interview with Kristine Landon-Smith

December 2009

Project planning completed

January 2010

Master class for teachers delivering the project

January – March 2010

Project delivery in Year 10 GCSE Drama lessons and green screen filming

April 2010

Editing of the film

May 2010

Presentation of the film to students, parents and teachers

and improvising. At first students were unsure about speaking in languages other than English and using accents from their cultures, but by the end of the project all students had created interesting characters and performances. It was fascinating to watch a shift in the class dynamic as previously quiet or withdrawn students gained new confidence from seeing their cultures represented in the class and using cultural reference points pertinent to them. Some students were slightly unsure of this new method of working and there were a couple of white British students who struggled to see how the work was relevant to them, but on the whole these new methods were embraced by students who were excited by the approach and as a result the original and exciting performance work that was developed. The bilingual work was fascinating and saw Persian, Italian, Gujarati, Greek, English, Albanian, Polish and Jamaican characters communicating and listening to each other. Due to the range of languages the communication and listening was at a deeper level than if all of the performances were in English which led to a sensitivity in the performances that was wonderful to watch.

At the end of the project I asked a group of the students involved to complete an evaluation of the project and the feedback was overwhelmingly positive. All students commented that they enjoyed the workshops, felt more confident about using their language/culture in the classroom and now had a better understanding of the different cultures represented and languages spoken by the members of their class. They were full of praise for Kristine and commented on how fun and energetic she was and how confident she made them feel. One student commented that he 'got to see everybody as an individual and got to understand their cultures.'

The director's point of view

I asked the teachers to work as directors. All three teachers on this team had acting and directing backgrounds of some sort and therefore they found it very easy to step into this 'active' position of role-playing. I slightly adapted their own practice by asking them not to set up improvisations so formally, not to put actors/students so obviously in the spotlight but to merge the moment from set up to scene so that actors were taken unaware suddenly actors and students found themselves in free flowing scenes which they had not set up or prepared. In this same quick way which I describe as 'sketching and rubbing out,' I was able to show teachers that if you move quickly from student to student, it is easy to get rid of initial fear around using a language other than English or a dialect from a heritage which is not English.

One moves quickly from the tentative student trying to capture a fleeting moment from a student prepared to bring their cultural context to the floor. As the incidences

of this build up, more and more students step in.

In the early master class with actors, one of the teachers said they would not have the confidence to 'play with culture' in the way I was doing because they felt they did not know enough about those particular cultures to 'play' with them. However, after only a few sessions all the teachers were 'playing with culture' and what it took was confidence and then the imagination to set up scenes where students would naturally play across cultures.

Students were attentive as they saw their peers in ways they had not seen before. Students grew in confidence and many students expressed how surprised they were that they suddenly felt 'in their own skin'. And this feeling gave them huge potential artistically. One student using Gujarati as a language and accented English said he found exactly how to make people laugh as he was performing in this way. He said to have such confidence in his performance as the Gujarati man gave him huge confidence in his own position in the classroom.

The Product

At first it was our aim to create a live performance with the fifty students we had been working with. As the project progressed however the subtlety of the work and the performances became apparent and it seemed to us that a film would better reflect the work that the students were creating, show the process alongside the product and act as a lasting legacy of the project.

For the final two weeks all fifty students worked with Kristine and their drama teachers in the green screen room with our media

technician individually or in small groups. Successful characters and improvisations for each of the students had been listed and were recreated in front of the camera. Students commented that 'the green screen made the work more exciting' and we found that the students raised their focus and performance for the camera.

The editing then began and Kristine and our media technician, supported by Alda Terraciano, spent many hours editing all of the material to ensure we saw performances from

all fifty students, extracts from the lessons and the masterclass as well as testimonials from the students. The finished product is a half hour film which encapsulates the success of the project and celebrates the work of every student involved.

To mark the end of the project we held a sharing event for students and their parents and teachers. We were eager to see the response of the students when they saw themselves on screen and their teachers engaging in similar activities in the masterclass. Alda, our creative agent, held a post-film discussion with teachers and encouraged students and parents to participate in the discussion.

I was fascinated to hear the

responses from students, parents and teachers after watching the film. The process of the work was very evident in the end product and parents particularly commented on the subtle quality of performance, the confidence of students and the extraordinary quality of 'listening' in the bilingual improvisations.

Viewers felt the work was very mature and they commented how even though improvisations were in so many languages there was no difficulty in understanding what was going on. The success of the work lay in the connectivity between students and the way they were so comfortable with each other playing across cultures.

Project outcomes and legacy for the school

Testimonials from two of our students sum up really well the outcomes of the project for us. One student commented:

I didn't feel confident at first when using my culture in the classroom, because I had never done it before. After Tamasha I feel much more confident about being Indian and playing Indian characters in drama.' Another said 'I was able to be Jamaican in the classroom. I could be myself and I really enjoyed that, really really enjoyed that.

As drama teachers we feel that students have gained a huge amount from working with Kristine; they have deepened their knowledge of how to use and play with culture in the drama classroom. They have a much better understanding of other students in the class and have had open discussions about race, discrimination and culture. I feel it has made their work more sensitive and they have gained a huge amount of confidence when discussing each other's backgrounds and have also gained a much more respectful approach towards one another. The project made our bilingual students

feel special, like they had something extra to offer their performance work. Before the project these were often the students who felt they had less to offer as their spoken English, particularly in devised work, was not as strong as other members of the class.

As teachers we have been reenergised by spending time working with a theatre director and we have gained a new set of skills to use in our multi-lingual, multi-ethnic classrooms. What is important to us is that the project has a lasting legacy in both the drama department and the whole school. We are planning to show a shortened version of the film to all students in the school through assemblies accompanied by a presentation by some of the students who participated to allow every student to gain some insight into the project. We are also writing some of the new methods we used into existing Key Stage Three Schemes of Work and I am writing a new Year 10 Scheme of Work that aims to replicate the project completed this year with future Year 10 classes.

What next for Tamasha?

This work is hugely important for Tamasha. Within our theatre industry we are observing that many students in drama colleges and actors in rehearsal rooms across the country from BAME backgrounds are often not given the opportunity to bring themselves and therefore their cultural context to their work. Tamasha believes in sharing practice very early on and making interventions at a secondary school level, to HE, through to rehearsal room practice. Through the prism of working with predominantly Asian actors we have found a practice which 'plays' with culture on the rehearsal room floor. Our work in schools has helped us articulate more clearly exactly what that practice is and what the benefits and implications of that practice is, not only in a theatre context but beyond.

Tamasha is now looking at piloting a project to a number of schools which shares the work of this Creative Partnership project.